

Robert Fillips: The History of Åland.

Approximately 10,000 years ago the highest parts of Åland began to rise from the sea. During the course of the centuries the ice, the wind and the water have formed the cliffs and created the Åland landscape with its soft forms.

About 5,000 years ago, the first settlers came from the east. The water level was 60 m higher than it is today and the Åland archipelago consisted of a few, sparsely vegetated rocky islets in the north.

During the Viking times about 1,000 A.D. Åland was one of the most populated regions in Northern Europe. Trade spread. Åland was situated at the important trading route between Sweden and Russia.

In the 11th century the Christianity came to Åland. The oldest stone church was built in the 12th century. Saint Olof became the patron of Åland. His portrait decorated the medieval seal of Åland.

During the centuries Åland with its good site in the Baltic Sea was always interesting for the powerful surrounding states. Until the war 1808-1809 Åland belonged with Finland to Sweden.

Sweden had to cede Finland including Åland to Russia in 1809. The Russians started to erect the fortress at Bomarsund. Near Bomarsund the settlement Skarpans was built, the first town on Åland.

During the Krim-War 1854 the fortress Bomarsund was overwhelmed by superior English and French sea and land forces. Fortress and settlement were whole destroyed.

When the World War I approach to his end, Finland became independence in 1917. In the same year authorized representatives of Åland resolutely demanded the Swedish Government for a reunion. A plebiscite on Åland showed that the demand had the support of 95 %. But Finland declared the isles as part of its territory.

In 1918 the Finnish Civil War extended to Åland. Sweden sent 600 soldiers to Åland to incline both sides to hearings. After German forces came into operation Sweden returned again. When the Finnish Government arrested the two chairmen of the Provincial Assembly, Julius Sundblom and Carl Björkman, at England's suggestion the Åland question was referred to the League of Nations. On June 24, 1921, the verdict fell, giving Finland sovereignty over Åland and the people of Åland guarantees for the preservation of their Swedish language and culture. On June 9, 1922, Åland's Provincial Assembly, elected on the basis of the Autonomy Act, met for its first plenary session.

In the treaty of Stockholm on January 7, 1939, Finland and Sweden decided a common defense of the archipelago and a fortification of the Southern Isles. When Finland allied with Germany in 1941 the Swedish Government took back the motion for the treaty of Stockholm. There upon Finnish military built fortifications on Åland. In the peace of Paris (1947) Finland declared again Åland a neutral zone.

On December 28, 1951 the Finnish Parliament ratified the new Autonomy Act. In 1954 Åland got its own flag. In 1959 progressive Åland shipowners set up the foundation of modern tourist trade between Sweden and Åland. Tourism in the Åland Islands became an increasing success. Since 1970 Åland gets representation in the Nordic Council. On January 1, 1993 a new Autonomy Act was drafted. Since January 1, 1995 Åland is represented in the European Union.

The Autonomy

Thanks to the autonomy Åland practically functions as an independent state with its own legislation and administrative machinery. The Åland Legislative Assembly has the right to pass laws in the sectors of education, culture, health and medical services, promotion of industry, international communications, the postal service, local district administration and the police service. No armed forces may be stationed in the province.

At birth, the citizens of Åland acquire regional Åland citizenship which is necessary to possess in order to vote and stand for election in Åland parliamentary and local elections. This regional citizenship also gives a person the right to own and hold real estate and carry on business in Åland.